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ABSTRACT

One of the major goals of the English class is to give the student the sort of experience that will enable him to increase his power over language. Therefore, it is illogical to try to separate oral and written skills in the classroom. Real discourse in the real world results from a real need. In the typical English class, there is no rhetorical situation. A classroom should demonstrate daily that the use of language is a way of understanding, coping with, and changing experience. The English class must become a micro-city, where a great many events are transpiring at the same time. Students must have media available and experiment in using them. (CK)

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The Radical English Class: Student Faces Student in Discourse Without Grades

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One of Mark Twain's great stories, as told by Hal Holbrook, con-
cerns an elderly lady, a friend of Mark's, who was ailing.

She'd gone down and down to the point where medicines no
longer had any helpful effect on her. I told her I could cure
her in a week. I said she must give up smoking, and drink-
ing . . . and swearing, and by the end of a week she'd be on
her feet. Why, she said she couldn't give up smoking and
drinking and swearing because she'd never done any of
those things! So there it was. She'd neglected her habits.
She was a sinking ship with no freight to throw overboard.
Why, just one or two little bad habits would have saved
her; but she was just a moral pauper.¹

In fact, the traditional English class is also a sinking ship, but there is
plenty of freight to throw overboard—and in changing the class so that it
responds to the times, the primary effort will indeed be to get rid of the

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The Radical English Class: Student Faces Student in Discourse Without Grades

bad habits that stultify what by all rights ought to be the most rewarding of inquiries for students.

It is fairly easy to draw up a bill of particulars against English as she is frequently—perhaps, most often—taught: the dull pedantry of WASP textbooks, the smug “custodian-of-the-culture” attitude of teachers, the rigidity imposed by syllabi and lesson plans, the inhuman oversimplicity threatened by behavioral objectives. And so on. In California, teachers good, bad, and indifferent are saddled with mass textbook adoptions, in elementary and junior high classes at least, that must come about only because the state’s educational hierarchy is incapable of understanding that within the schools are some millions of *individual* students, each with his own passions and problems, each with his own culture and goals. And so on. In East Los Angeles, as in countless enclaves throughout the United States, the schools view their first task as the acculturation of Chicano kids so that they fit into the (obviously desirable) social and language norms of white middle-class America. And so on.

It is time for redefining the mission of the English class, and time to investigate some propositions that might rapidly enable teachers to meet the needs of students in the 1970’s. In what follows appear some fairly simple notions that might serve as rationales for modern English classes.

It is not revolutionary to remark that, to a great degree, only insofar as a human being can manipulate his language can he understand and manipulate experience. Hence, it is obviously one of the major goals of the English class—and possibly the only goal—to give the student that sort of experience which will enable him to increase his power over language. There are, to be sure, subject matters that have justifiable places in the blocks of time that are to be filled by “English”: literature, linguistics, formal speaking, and so on. But in grade school and on through high school, the crucial major function of the English class is to provide the student with intensive, guided experience in language transactions. The teacher, then, is obliged to consider the nature of language transactions and to search for practical applications of theories about what transpires in the languaging process. If some of these theories seem nugatory, many of them have nonetheless been submerged by dogma and practice so that a resurrection will have at least the benefit of what my colleague Walter Fisher calls a rhetoric of reaffirmation.

Therefore.

Discourse is a fabric that should not be rent; that is, speech and writing are two manifestations of what is essentially the same activity. From a behavioral point of view, speaking and writing are simply two

W. Ross Winterowd

different methods of manipulating the same system (i.e., language). That these different methods entail special problems for the teacher is not questioned. Some students almost seem born to eloquence, but for apparently ineluctable reasons never learn to write very well, or vice versa. However, it is totally unreasonable to assume that at their bases speech and writing are essentially different; they both result from applying an "instinct" for languaging to a language system; they both entail competence and performance. Therefore, it is totally reasonable to assume that "overlap" of skills in speaking and writing makes it particularly wasteful to separate the two skills in the classroom.

ELIMINATING THE 'DRY RUN'

In real life, the language transaction is never what John Dixon calls "a dry run." Only in the classroom does the use of language become a meaningless exercise, intended for no real audience and expected to bring about no particular effect (except, of course, a grade). In many ways, the rhetoric that is practiced in the classroom is paradoxically arhetorical, for it has no purpose and springs from no cause. Real discourse in the real world comes about because of a need—either external to or internal within the discourses. In the real world, discourse is shaped by situations (such as social taboos and the heat of the moment) to influence an audience of one or one million in certain ways that are not always premeditated. And in the real world, discourse is "published" or "broadcast." A personal letter, the Post Office Department willing, reaches a recipient; a conversation involves at least one listener. But the dummy discourse of the English class is seldom published or broadcast in any real sense. Themes go to the teacher. Class discussions ploddingly result in predictable answers to predictable questions.

In the typical English class, in short, there is no *rhetorical situation*, and that is one of the tragic failings of education. A rhetorical situation is a complex of factors in the real world that prompt discourse to come into being (to fill a need) and that exert influences to shape the discourse as it comes into being. Lloyd Bitzer explains this way:

Prior to the creation and presentation of discourse, there are three constituents of any rhetorical situation: the first is *exigence*; the second and third are elements of the complex, namely the *audience* to be constrained in decision and action, and the *constraints* which influence the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience.¹

Bitzer goes on to explain *exigence* as "an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which

The Radical English Class: Student Faces Student in Discourse Without Grades

is other than it should be."³ In other words, an exigence is a real situation that can be manipulated or changed or clarified through the use of language. The great majority of theme assignments, of course, are only artificial exigences, practice manipulations that lack the living, breathing urgency that is characteristic of the rhetorical situation. And then discourse demands an audience, not just the teacher, but a person or group of persons who can be influenced one way or another, urged to act or constrained from acting, made to agree or disagree, through the rhetorical act. Finally, the rhetorical situation involves *constraints*.

Standard sources of constraint include beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like; and when the orator enters the situation, his discourse not only harnesses constraints given by situation but provides additional important constraints—for example his personal character, his logical proofs, and his style.⁴

The writer/speaker, if he is in a real situation, must adjust to these factors and countless more, most of which are imposed upon him by the audience he is addressing. Adjustment to the audience is known, of course, as *rhetorical stance*. In his classic article "The Rhetorical Stance," Wayne Booth has this to say:

The common ingredient that I find in all of the writing I admire—excluding for now novels, plays and poems—is something that I shall reluctantly call the rhetorical stance, a stance which depends on discovering and maintaining in any writing situation a proper balance among the three elements that are at work in any communicative effort: the available arguments about the subject itself, the interests and peculiarities of the audience, and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker.⁵

There must be an audience if the student is to learn to make those delicate adjustments which add up to the proper rhetorical stance for the given occasion.

Rhetorical situation. Rhetorical stance.

As I said earlier, the normal English class is aseptically arhetorical. Students write essays on unimportant subjects for no audience but the teacher. A classroom should demonstrate, day in and day out, that the use of language is a way of understanding, coping with, and changing experience. Issues should live, and around the somnolence of the English class, every community, from Maine to California, seethes, and students sense the unreality of writing dry-run essays on topics that don't make one damn in the real world.

W. Ross Winterowd

THE ENGLISH CLASS A MICRO-CITY

The English class must become more like a city, must be, in fact, a micro-city, where a great many events are transpiring at the same time. Within the limits of decency, legality, and the need to earn one's bread and butter, the urban American has the freedom, in theory at least, to shape his own destiny and to help shape that of his city. And when the need is great enough, when the pressures rise, the individual will participate, each according to his own style. But no one participates in dummy runs. ("I'm not really running for mayor, but I'd like you to campaign for me just to see how well you do it.")

Nor am I, I must stress, banishing traditional concerns from the English class. It is quite possible and even common and predictable that students will become excited about, say, literature and want to discuss it and write about it—and try to convince other students of their views. What I *am* saying is that in the English class particularly, everyone should be allowed to do his own thing in his own way.

In this English class, this micro-city, there will obviously be newspapers and radio stations, magazines and TV stations. In other words, it is important that students have media available and that they experiment in using them. (It is more important for students to learn the "grammar" of TV and cinema than it is for them to learn the grammar of English.) Once the student becomes involved with an issue, he needs to get his point of view across to his fellow citizens in the class, and it should be the student's prerogative to choose his own medium: VTR, tape recorder, film, dittoed essay, etc. He also ought to choose his own form: poem, essay, short drama, etc.

The cacophony of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and, yes, of Salt Lake City, Dubuque, and Augusta, is the symphony of the present; for better or for worse, our cities are what we are and point out our destiny; thus, the classroom must be urbanized. And a modern city is a wonderful conglomeration of cross purposes, failures and successes, smells and sounds, industry and idleness, hopefulness and hopelessness. In the city, one must, at the very least, learn tactics to survive, and at the very best, tactics to help the society renew itself.

In summary: if the English class is to become optimally successful in its goal of teaching the use of language, students must deal with real issues (i.e., issues that vitally concern them) for a real audience (i.e., as a very minimum, their classmates). It is axiomatic that in such a learning situation, each person will get automatic feedback on this use of language.

The Radical English Class: Student Faces Student in Discourse Without Grades

Instead of red squiggles from a middle-aged teacher, he will be getting flap from the people that he is trying to constrain in action or decision.

ENGLISH WITHOUT GRADES

William Stafford, the poet, remarks that if English teachers functioned outside the class as they do in it, they could never carry on a conversation, for their only response would be "C+" or "A—" or "D."

Which, naturally, leads to the problem of grading. Arguments against grading are now fashionable, but I would urge that every student in an English class should be graded on his work—that is, each should receive an "A." An "A" is the only defensible grade that can be given on discourse. The use of language is so intrinsic, so characteristic of man and so necessary for him, that grading him on it is like grading him on his digestion. To be sure, it is defensible to grade teachers, for if they are able to shape the proper rhetorical situation, every student will succeed. That is, abilities vary, as do particular talents. But everyone has the ability to be successful in given circumstances. It is the teacher's responsibility to create those circumstances.

Some students who write interesting poetry seem, for one reason or another, unable to produce better than run-of-the-mill expository essays; some students are brilliant speakers, but dismal writers; and some students seem pitifully ungifted in any phase of the languaging process. Grading students in English classes turns the whole process into an unreal game or, perhaps worse, into a competitive enterprise in which the most gifted succeed and the less gifted are doomed to perdition. A failing grade in mathematics represents a judgment on one particular sort of skill, one relatively tiny segment of the personality; *a failing grade in English is, in effect, a judgment on the whole person.* Grades in English classes have disastrous effects on children. And yet teachers and administrators seem blithely willing to go on labeling. In the real world, one is not graded, but one does experience success and failure. The object of the English class is to give the student maximum opportunity for success and cushion the debilitating abrasiveness of failure.

In the English class without grades, efforts at discourse would be met with responses—which is what happens in the rhetorical situation. A grade is not a response.

The radicalized English class will, then, be a micro-city, with all the cacophony and color of a real city. Students will communicate because they are human, and human beings *do* communicate. The communications will elicit *responses from an audience* rather than grades from a teacher.

W. Ross Winterowd

And quite unsystematically, but tenaciously, addressing the individual piece of discourse as it appears in the rhetorical situation, the teacher will point out ways in which students can increase their ability to use language to combine ideas into new and more meaningful structures.

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